

# EARLY LEARNING EXPERIENCES

By Kerry Vinson, B.A.

## Key to Good Behaviour



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**A**ccording to Dr. Nicholas Dodman, Program Director of Animal Behaviour at the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in Massachusetts, about half of all dogs born in the United States will not live to see a second birthday. They won't succumb to disease or accident – they will be put down because of their bad behaviour.

While I don't have any similar Canadian statistics, I believe the trend would be along the same lines in this country. This disconcerting phenomenon is a sad statement that underscores the lack of knowledge we have about dog behaviour in general, and more specifically the things that dog owners need to know to avoid this potential loss of life.

It is my view (and Dr. Dodman's) that it all starts with early socialization of puppies. While there is some difference of opinion as to when the window for socialization ends (I've heard figures ranging from 12 to 20 weeks of age), it would appear that it starts when the puppies open their eyes at around one to two weeks of age. Since most people don't acquire a puppy until about eight weeks of age, this would indicate some initial responsibility on the part of breeders to acclimatize puppies to people (particularly children) as well as other dogs, cats, and environmental phenomena such as loud noises. As soon as owners get their new dog, they need to conduct a crash course in socialization before the window of



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Photo courtesy Kerry Vinson

## “ IN GENERAL, THE PROGNOSIS FOR MODIFYING UNDESIRABLE CANINE BEHAVIOUR IS GOOD IF THE OWNER IS COMMITTED TO DOING SO... ”



### READ MORE ONLINE:

Be cautious about information on behaviour you might find on the Web — it can be hard to tell the difference between expert advice and what is actually poor information from unqualified people. Kerry Vinson recommends the following sites as a starting point for more information:

- Canadian dog bite prevention websites geared towards kids: [www.doggoneseafe.com](http://www.doggoneseafe.com) and [www.dogsandkids.ca](http://www.dogsandkids.ca)
- The Canadian Federation of Human Societies has behaviour articles at [www.cfhs.ca](http://www.cfhs.ca).
- The American SPCA has an entire section of its website devoted to animal behaviour — go to [www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org) and look for the Animal Behavior Center link.

opportunity closes. In some cases, people may want to wait to do this until all of their puppy's vaccinations are completed, but I would argue that it's more important to do a good job of socializing rather than keeping a puppy isolated. A viable compromise may be to allow a young puppy to interact with other dogs who have been vaccinated, in an environment that you know is relatively safe.

Try to give your puppy as many positive experiences with new things and people as possible, so that he/she won't become fearful or aggressive when exposed to these situations later on in life. Doing this consistently may take more time and energy than you had anticipated, but consider it as investment in the future enjoyment you will have with your dog. I can't emphasize how important early learning experiences are; most dog behaviour is the result of a combination of genetics and learning. While you can't change the genetics part of that equation, the learning part is in your hands. Keep in mind that dogs learn from the immediate consequences of their actions, and are continually learning on a daily basis

regardless of whether or not you've taken the time to teach them the right things. On a personal level, I have become acutely aware of this over the past year, having acquired two German Shepherd puppies at around the same time. I am continually reminded of the amount of time and energy it takes to teach them appropriate behaviour.

So, what do you do if you have put the effort into socializing and teaching your dog what is desirable behaviour, and you're still having a problem? For basic obedience issues there are lots of good dog trainers around who utilize positive reinforcement techniques as their primary methodology. You might want to start your search by going to your local veterinary clinic and asking who they recommend in your area.

For more serious behaviour problems, such as aggression, you should be aware of an important piece of information: In Canada, the dog behaviour business is completely unregulated. Therefore, it's important to check out the references of anyone you contact to help you with a serious behaviour problem. In the final analysis, your veterinarian is the best person to give you the necessary guidance in selecting a qualified and experienced behaviourist. In general, the prognosis for modifying undesirable canine behaviour is good if the owner is committed to doing so, and he or she has sound knowledge based on the principles of learning theory. If these two factors are present, then it would go a long way towards increasing the numbers of dogs who can live to a ripe old age and whose fate is not determined by their behaviour. When given the opportunity and the correct guidance, most dogs are creatures who are eager to learn; after all, they are not designated as "man's best friend" without good reason. 🐾